

# Strategies for Facilitating Online Discussions

It is vital that instructors facilitate online discussions to maintain interest, motivation, and engagement of students. Below are eight ways instructors can encourage both participation and knowledge construction in online discussions.

## Prompts

If your students are not engaging with your initial question how you envisioned, they probably are unsure of your expectations or are unclear about what the question is asking. It can be helpful to give them further prompts to redirect or jumpstart the discussion. The prompts can include specific directions on how to approach the question, concrete examples, or an example of an acceptable response to the question.

### Examples

- I have been monitoring the discussion and have not seen any posts, so I wanted to give you a little more information to get you started. Consider the following elements as you compose your discussion response this week [list elements]. For example...
- Consider the following scenario [to put the discussion in a context]...
- Let me give you a more concrete example...
- From my experience, an example to help you understand the concept is...

## Elaboration

Ask students to elaborate on ideas. This can lead to deeper thinking about the issue/topic and build a better understanding of the expectations of what should be included in their discussion posts. Be specific on exactly what you want the student to elaborate on by asking questions to guide the student to the response and information you are looking for them to produce.

### Examples

- You have a great start on the discussion this week. Can you elaborate on your thoughts and ideas and consider the following in your response [list areas where learner has not responded fully to the discussion question]?
- I like how you mention [list element(s)]. Could you tell me more about [list area in which you want them to provide more information]?

## Clarification

Ask students for clarification when posts are lacking details or are hard to follow. Ask students to state their response in a different way; give an example of what they are talking about; provide an illustration to accompany their post; or extend their response to form a more complete thought. If the post is off topic or seems extraneous, ask the student to explain how their post relates to the topic/question that was posed.

### Examples

- I appreciate your comments about . . . .
  - Can you clarify your response, so we can clearly understand your thoughts and ideas?
  - Can you provide an illustration or example?
  - Can you state this in a different way?
- I appreciate your comment; however, I am unclear how this relates to the discussion question. Can you provide more information to help us see the connection to the topic we are discussing this week?

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## Weaving

If a discussion becomes disorganized or off-topic, weaving can be an effective way to get students back on track. It can also be used to provide a deeper understanding by showing the connections between multiple ideas. By referring to and combining the information in multiple posts, weaving also demonstrates your presence in the discussion board even if you only post a couple of times. While weaving the students' posts together, you can also provide further examples and knowledge on the topic to build understanding and add additional perspective.

### Examples

- I really appreciate the multiple perspectives on the issue we are discussing this week. John, Sue, and Nancy believe...While Paul, Jerry, and Carrie believe...
- How do you reconcile the different views?
- Is there compelling evidence to support one view over the other?
- Are there other ways of viewing this issue that have not been considered?
- For example, in my experience...
- One aspect of the readings that has not been discussed is... What impact does this have?

### *Off-topic weaving:*

- I really appreciate the points that have been on the issue including... It appears that some of the points do not relate specifically to this topic such as..., so please be sure that you consider...as you discuss the topic to ensure that all of your comments help us develop a deeper understanding of the topic or issue.

## Perspectives

When students discuss an issue from only one viewpoint and ignore evidence that supports a different view on the topic, it can be helpful to take an alternative perspective. Taking a different perspective and asking questions that encourage students to consider multiple perspectives can help expand their understanding of a topic or issue.

### Examples

- One aspect of the readings that has not been discussed is .... What impact does this have?
- Consider the following alternative scenario... How would this influence your view of the issue?
- According to...there is another side to this issue. They cite...as evidence for their perspective. How does this information fit with your perspective on the issue?
- Is there another way of looking at this perspective from a different lens? What if you were faced with...? What would you "do if...occurred? How would you feel if...?
- From my experience, I have found...

## Inferences and Assumptions

Asking students to reflect on the assumptions and inferences they are making in their posts can help them understand that their statements may be dependent upon other things being valid or certain beliefs. By challenging students in this way, you are helping them build stronger arguments based on verifiable evidence. You can also request that students identify and analyze the inferences and assumptions authors and/or experts make in their contributions to spur discussion and critical thinking about the topic.

### Examples

- Can you discuss the specific inferences and assumptions you are making from this perspective?
- For this to be true, then ... would also have to be true. Have you considered this?

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- For this to be true, then you must believe that. ...
- What evidence do you have to support the inferences and assumptions you are making?
- What inferences and assumptions does the author make to lead to his conclusions?

### Implications

Asking students to reflect on the implications of their line of reasoning or the line of reasoning of an expert helps build critical thinking skills and metacognition. Ask students to consider not only immediate implications but also those that will affect the future

#### Examples

- Can you discuss the implications of your line of reasoning on this issue?
- If this is true, how will this influence the present conditions? What will that mean for the future?
- If this is true, what actions must be taken today? In the future?
- What groups will this line of reasoning affect?

### Summaries

Providing a summary post at the end of the discussion helps reiterate important ideas and point out misconceptions to students. You can also easily integrate your own opinions and examples in the summary now that it will have less direct influence on your students' posts.

#### Examples

- I have really appreciated the depth of thinking that has taken place during this discussion. It appears that many of you believe..., while others feel that...
- You have done a great job of demonstrating your understanding of the implications of the different lines of reasoning from the multiple perspectives of the authors in the readings.
- Some of the gaps that still exist are...
- There was some confusion about...
- Some of the interpretations did not support...
- From my experience, I believe...
- I have used...
- From my experience, an example of this is...

Source:

Stavredes, T. (2011). *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for student success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.